

# “You Probably Don’t Even Know I Exist”: Notes from a College Prison Program

Jane Maher

*ABSTRACT: Although much has been written recently about prison “writing” in general (Wally Lamb’s *Couldn’t Keep It to Myself*, Mark Salzman’s *True Notebooks*), far less has been written about the efforts and challenges involved in helping prisoners. In this case, females in a maximum-security prison in Westchester County, New York, learn the kind of writing skills required to succeed in college. While the inmate-students’ writing skills in the pre-college program are similar to those of basic writers on the “outside,” the students’ lack of confidence in their ability and their belief that they are not “worthy” of a college education often present challenges (and rewards) that I begin to examine in this article.*

When I was asked in 1997 to teach a basic writing course to the female inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester, New York, I knew a lot about teaching writing, but I knew absolutely nothing about prisons, prisoners, their need for post-secondary education, or the way their past personal and educational experiences would impact on their ability to succeed in college.

Now, I sometimes think I know far too much: about the conditions that contributed to the circumstances that brought many of the women to prison in the first place; about the pain and angst they suffer upon being separated from their families, particularly their children; about the poor (or nonexistent) educations they received before arriving at prison; about the inequality of sentencing based on race and class; about the diseases that ravage these women and their families as a result of poverty; about the way that drugs can destroy two, even three generations of the same family; about the way many people in society view these prisoners (“Aren’t you afraid of

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them?" is the question I am most often asked about my work); about the way that politicians support harsh sentencing to win public approval, from the draconian but ineffectual Rockefeller drug laws to the decisions handed down day after day by parole boards, keeping even non-violent offenders behind bars until they "max" out; about the fact that Pell and TAP grants for prisoners were withdrawn in 1995 in order to save the taxpayers' money, despite the fact that the amount being spent on post-secondary education for prisoners was only a minuscule portion of the total budget—about six cents of every ten program dollars (Kunen 38); about the fact that this country imprisons more people than any other country in the world—half a million more than Communist China (Schlosser 52); about the fact that hundreds of thousands of the almost two million prisoners in the United States will be released in the next ten years having received little or no training or education to prepare them for reentry (Schlosser 58); and most disturbing of all, about the fact that these conditions, coupled with scores of others, often leave the prisoners feeling frustration, rage, helplessness, or a sense of worthlessness.

But I also know that good things can happen in prison, as contradictory as that sounds. One of them, in fact, is the non-profit Women's Prison Education Partnership college program, one of several programs that exist at Bedford Hills because of the extraordinary courage and wisdom of Elaine A. Lord, the recently retired superintendent. In the midst of the "get tough on crime," "race to incarcerate," "three strikes and you're out," "send them back to prison for minor parole infractions," "build more prisons than schools" mentality that has overtaken the United States, Lord has steadfastly focused on programs that will help the women prepare for release. "Empowerment is what I aspire to bring to the women," she said in a recent interview. "I struggle with whether this is a valid concept in a prison, but the women report that they felt safe at Bedford, sometimes for the first time in memory, and that they were able to learn and think" (Wilson 25).

For the past 20 years, Bedford Hills has been a model facility for those who believe that prisons can actually be places where inmates are able to benefit from education, training, and counseling. As one of the college students wrote, "Bedford is the place that cured me of the diseases that brought me here."

Evidence of this curing environment is everywhere. The college program's computing and learning center (Bedford is one of the few prisons in New York State where inmates are permitted to have access to com-

puters) is located in the basement of the facility's administration building, right next door to the children's center, where inmates can spend time visiting with their children. In the children's center, women learn to read so they can make tapes to send to their children; take courses in child care and development (overseen by volunteers from Bank Street College); contact their children's social workers, care givers, and teachers; and learn parenting skills. Women who are pregnant when they are arrested (provided they satisfy certain requirements) can keep their babies with them in the prison nursery for 18 months—one of the few prisons in the United States where such a program exists (and the model for prison nurseries in several European countries). Members of the local chapter of NOW (the National Organization for Women) meet regularly to conduct book discussion groups with some of the inmates; lawyers from Columbia Law School hold seminars with the women to help them understand their cases and their rights of appeal; members of church groups provide much-needed services to the women—from preparing food for visiting family members (who often travel for hours with young children via public transportation) to collecting clothes for the women to wear when they are released. The women are able to participate in the Puppies Behind Bars program, in which they train puppies for eventual service as guide dogs for the disabled. Although Bedford Hills looks very much like a prison, with rows of razor wire surrounding its perimeter, the presence of black Labrador puppies learning to walk up and down staircases and children crawling around the playroom can make it seem like a very human place at times. The women receive mandatory counseling for drug and alcohol addiction, participate in family violence prevention programs, sexual abuse workshops, and learn about anger management. During the summer, through the Host Family Program, inmates' children reside with local families so they can spend entire days for a week or two with their mothers at the prison. The inmates are required to participate in literacy programs—ABE (Adult Basic Education) and GED (General Educational Development)—sponsored by the Department of Correctional Services, and the GED passing rate at Bedford Hills is far higher than in most U.S. prisons. This success is the result of an aggressive and determined effort on the part of New York State Department of Corrections Deputy Superintendent of Education, Dr. John Nuttall, to improve the quality of instruction and participation in these classes.

In fact, the policies and practices at the prison are so progressive that in the late 1980s, long before doctors and other medical personnel fully

understood the causes and treatment of AIDS, the inmates at Bedford Hills had, with the full approval and cooperation of the superintendent, set up a program whereby they could learn and then teach each other about the disease, care for each other, and educate people both inside and *outside*; in fact, the inmates collaborated in writing a book about the ACE (AIDS Counseling and Education) program, in which they described their experiences as they joined together to overcome the fear and ignorance that existed among the inmates and the corrections officers as more and more inmates were diagnosed with HIV and AIDS.

A volunteer at the prison who had also worked at several other prisons once told me that the women at Bedford Hills actually *look* different than prisoners at other facilities: they walk with their heads held higher, make eye contact, engage in conversation in a way that indicates a sense of pride and self-worth. "Bedford Hills is a prison, of course," she noted, "but it is *less* of a prison because the women are still being encouraged to think, to change, and to hope."

Despite this environment, however, when I arrived at Bedford Hills in the late 1990s, the college program was barely functioning. When TAP (New York State Tuition Assistance Program) and federally financed Pell grants were withdrawn in 1995, the thriving, full-time college program administered by Mercy College ceased to exist, along with 350 other prison college programs across the United States (despite an aggressive lobbying campaign mounted by college administrators and educators who produced reams of evidence showing the benefits to society of post-secondary prison education). At Bedford Hills, the impact of losing the college program was immediate and severe. Several inmates were tantalizingly close to earning their degrees, and they were crushed by the prospect of never completing their college education. Many of the inmates had painstakingly completed all of the non-credit requirements and had finally begun to earn college credits. "My son and I were going to start college at the same time," one of the inmates recalled, "and I knew that it was so hard for him on the outside that when I told him I wasn't going to be able to go to college, it would take away his incentive—it was the one time in his life that I had been a positive role model to him, and now I didn't even have that to offer him." Use of the library dropped, as did interest in the GED program. There was an increase in suicide attempts. Fighting on the living units increased. And the officers noticed that the women who had formerly participated in study groups or tutored other students were now struggling to find a way to

replace college. “The card games, boring television, street talk, gettin’ it on did not satisfy them anymore,” one of the officers noted.

Within two months of the withdrawal of college, several of the inmates asked the superintendent if they could try to find volunteers who would be willing to reinstate the college program without using public funds. As usual, the superintendent not only agreed, she helped to identify and contact potential resources. A community organizer and long-time prison volunteer, Thea Jackson, responded with great enthusiasm—and efficiency. Through her friendship with Dr. Regina Perrugi, who was President of Marymount Manhattan College at the time, she was able to organize a consortium of several metropolitan-area colleges that agreed to provide instructors and other resources, with Marymount Manhattan functioning as the degree-granting institution. It was a grand scheme—but a risky one. There was no precedent, and no money. Would people make donations to a program that had just lost public funding based on the decisions of their own elected officials?

Running a college program in a maximum-security facility is difficult under the best of circumstances: security rules prohibit the use of fax machines, the Internet, e-mail, calculators, palm pilots, cell phones. All visitors must be approved by the Department of Correctional Services in Albany before they are permitted to enter the facility (a process that can take up to two months), and, in addition, all approved visitors must have their name placed on a gate clearance *each and every* time they enter the facility—a time-consuming practice that eliminates any possibility of a professor just “dropping in” to confer with students. All academic supplies must be approved in advance and inspected upon arrival—no workbooks with metal spiral bindings (the mentally ill inmates might use them to self-injure). The student-inmates can only move from place to place within the facility at certain times and under certain conditions. Instructors can only communicate with the inmates during class time or during pre-arranged appointments in the learning center. Given the way the inmates’ days are scheduled and the availability of classrooms, college courses can only be offered in the evenings—from 6:30 until 9:30—at the end of very long days for both the inmate-students and the professors. The prison is located in one of the most beautiful (and expensive) areas in lower Westchester County, a place where few college professors can afford to live; therefore, professors who volunteer to teach often have to travel relatively long distances to get to and from the prison. Department of Correctional

Services' rules prohibit volunteers from sharing personal information with the inmates in order to protect the volunteers' safety, but this practice is often antithetical to the open and questioning climate that exists in college classrooms; professors must refrain from using personal examples to illustrate, to model, to inspire the students.

Negotiating these conditions was difficult enough when Mercy College had a full-time administrator in place. (Mercy's program was a model among prison college programs, and Mercy College continues to support the "new" program with extraordinarily generous donations—each semester, they cover the cost of four or five courses.) When the "private" college program returned, particularly during its first semester of operation, when it had not yet raised any money, when it had no office supplies, when it had no facilitator, it was a logistical nightmare.

Yet we managed, not only because of the enthusiasm of the students, the faculty, and the community organizers, but because of the good will of the facility's staff. Of course, there was the occasional officer who wondered why prisoners should be entitled to a free college education when they could not afford one for themselves or in many cases for their children, but, for the most part, the officers understood what the politicians and the public who voted for these politicians had not. As one officer explained, "I see these women, girls really, no more than 17 or 18 or 19 or 20, coming back again and again because of drugs or the street life, and I know that they came back because they went home the same way they came—with no education, no job prospects. Pimps, drugs, abuse, prison—it's a cycle. Maybe college can break that." The officers even help the women with their homework. "I think this essay is ready for our class publication," one of the students wrote in a note to me. "I moved the second paragraph to the end. At first I didn't agree with you but the officer tonight read it and he said I should move it, he sees your point."

College can break the cycle. As the new college program gained stability, Dr. Michelle Fine, a renowned sociologist from the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center and a former volunteer in the program, conducted (with several student inmates as co-researchers) an intensive qualitative and quantitative study showing that the recidivism rate of female offenders decreases in direct proportion to the amount of college education they receive in prison (*Changing Minds*).

When I first began to teach in the college program at the prison in 1997, however, I was not aware of many of these facts and circumstances.

In fact, the reason I was asked to participate was that although those students who had already participated in college were doing okay (in fact, they were working harder than ever, reinvigorated by the fact that college had returned), the new students, those who had no college experience and particularly those who had recently entered the prison system, were struggling mightily: extremely low scores on the admissions examinations, poor attendance, low confidence, inappropriate classroom behavior, high attrition. I recognized and identified these students immediately. My years of experience teaching basic writing first at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY, as an adjunct, and then at Nassau Community College as one of the founders of the Basic Education Program, my graduate work in composition studies at New York University, my research and writing of the biography of Mina Shaughnessy—all had prepared me to identify and help those students who, as Shaughnessy once said, “come to us at the last moment of their formal education, expecting, needing to encounter teachers who will finally make a difference” (qtd. in Maher 309).

But as I came to know these students, I began to realize that although they were similar in some ways to those students on the “outside” (a term the inmates use) who are required to take non-credit courses, they were different in ways that would affect and impact my teaching—and their learning. Shaughnessy had talked about the “last moment”; I began to feel that these students were beyond that already precarious point in their educational careers, perhaps even in their lives.

These differences are difficult to describe and were, at first, difficult to identify. In most cases, the students’ reading and writing skills were slightly better than those of the students whom I taught on the outside. I was not quite sure how to account for this because as I began to get to know the “pre-college” students (a term that the inmates themselves began to use to refer to the students in non-credit classes), I realized that their educational experiences had been truly dismal, either because of the poor quality of the schools they had attended or because their lives had been so chaotic that they had not attended school very much, if at all. I later began to think that their stronger literacy skills were a result of the fact that the primary means of communicating with those on the outside was through letter writing; phone calls are prohibitively expensive and many family members are unable or unwilling to visit. The exception to this was the Latina students, most of whom earned their GEDs in Spanish at the prison and thus were unable to pass the admissions examinations in English,

despite the implementation of ELL (English Language Learning) workshops.

Despite these better skills, however, many of the pre-college students had little or no confidence in themselves, and little or no sense of the connection between their poor educational experiences and their current status. In contrast to the resistance or even bravado sometimes exhibited by my students on the outside—"I didn't take the admissions test seriously"; "These non-credit classes are a waste of my time"; "Why do I have to pay money when I'm not earning credit?"—many of the women who placed into the pre-college courses at Bedford Hills seemed to believe that they had relinquished all rights to any kind of attention at all, much less a college education. This sense of worthlessness was reflected in one of the first notes I received from an inmate interested in enrolling in the college program, the note from which I have taken my title. "You probably don't even know I exist," the note began:

You are a very busy person and may not have time for me. And I don't know if I can come to college at all. I just earned my GED at Rikers and my scores were good, at least that is what my counselor said, but I have never been a good student and I have no money to pay for fees or books. I never thought I was smart at all because I didn't get good grades and everyone said it was okay when I dropped out of high school at a young age and pregnant. If I can't come to college I understand, but do you have college books that I can read and memorize so I can educate myself a little more and keep up with my peers on the unit?

Other notes and conversations confirm this sense of not belonging, of a lack of entitlement. I have saved these notes, first in the hope of using them to write a book about the program (when there is time for such a project), but now because they are very special to me, both as a writing instructor and as a human being. They represent and reflect the challenge I and others in the program face: to help these women overcome a pervading sense of not belonging, of not being worthy of attention, of not having a voice, a place, a future. For those who wonder what became of the children described in Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, I fear I have the answer in this two-inch-thick packet of notes I have accumulated over the past seven years. I remember clearly the early Saturday morning about five years ago when I began to read the responses my students wrote in



reaction to Cedric Jennings' struggle to succeed at Brown University after having attended one of the worst high schools in the nation (reported by Ron Suskind in *A Hope in the Unseen*). I had expected the women to relate to Cedric's struggles, to sympathize with the inequities he endured, to realize how difficult it was for him to grow up with his father in prison. Instead, they said he was lucky: "He has a roof over his head, a mother who works. He has never been shot or stabbed. That's more than my kids have."

One student recalled being referred to as "fat house" through the first two years of high school; she dropped out, became a prostitute, and was eventually sentenced to ten years for a drug-related crime. "I was being abused at home sexually, but then going to school I didn't fit in so I went to the streets. And now here I am. I got my GED after two tries. Now let's see if I can do college. I won't tell my family I'm trying for college they'll just tell me I'm stupid and wasting my time."

Another student wrote, "I did not like the movie [*The Sweet Hereafter*]. It brought back memories. Do not show that movie to us anymore. I'm not the only one."

At one of the first sessions of one of the first basic writing courses I taught at Bedford Hills, I asked the women to tell me what kind of writing they did in prison and what kind of writing they needed help with. Their responses were further reminders of the differences between them and the students whom I usually taught: My students on the outside occasionally remind me that as soon as they complete their college writing requirements, they will never have to write again. The women in my course at Bedford Hills, however, told me about writing projects that had profound and permanent effects upon them.

Writing a formal letter to the family that would take care of my baby when she left me and the [prison] nursery program to go into foster care. I read it to her in the middle of the last night we were together. I leaned over her crib knowing she did not understand the words but the family will know the words have meaning. In the letter I asked the family to love her for me. I did not need help with that letter. It came from my heart. Mistakes were not of concern to me just that the family knew this was a loved and wanted baby.

Breaking the news to my grandmother that I am HIV positive. She does not understand that there is medication today. I have to tell her so she can have my children tested.

Writing to my children's teachers. They are going to see the envelope saying the prison and the inmate box number. I don't want to bring more shame on my children but I have a right to know how they are doing. I want to know if they are getting extra help that they need.

I want to be in college and need writing skills for that. Please help me. My way out of this life is an education. I have to start over when I get out. Be where nobody knows me. I will have to read job ads, find an apartment, find my children.

I am going to write about my educational failures so others can be warned—no they are not my failures. I was told to take vocational classes because I am a woman. Because I am black. Because I had no one to look out for me.

The women explained in their notes that they must write to judges, court-appointed lawyers, social workers, case workers, doctors, correctional services personnel, even funeral directors. And in almost every note to me, they wished that they could write better, more clearly, "say it right" so that attention would be paid. Perhaps the most painful notes for me to read were those that explained that the woman had not done any writing recently for they had no one to write to.

Approximately 45% of the women at Bedford Hills suffer from mental illness, and some of these women place into the pre-college program. "I'm going to write to request that my mental meds be reduced so I don't fall asleep in class or while doing my homework."

Other notes reflect the overwhelming factors working against these students as they begin college, often at the same time they are beginning to serve their prison sentences. The students whose reading and writing skills (and self-confidence) are weakest are the ones who are most overwhelmed by the circumstances that arise as they begin their long periods of incarceration. (Because Bedford Hills is a maximum-security prison, only women with sentences longer than eight years are usually sent

there. Ironically, this is an advantage in terms of the college program because it affords the women—who are able to take two courses per semester—enough time to earn a two-year and sometimes a four-year degree.)

I have been here for two months after almost a year in the county jail. I can't concentrate on school right now and I am going to drop out and return my books. I read the first pages of homework over and over but can't seem to realize what it says. I can only think of the pain I have caused my mother. And can her health hold up under the stress of caring for my children and her own children still at home (my two brothers).

Often, as I make the long drive home from the prison at 9:30 at night, I wonder how even the strongest women function under the circumstances they encounter in prison. While I am frequently amazed at the way my students on the outside manage to juggle the responsibilities of family, work, and school, these issues seem more manageable than the circumstances faced by the inmates. When I first began to volunteer at the prison, I believed that the women would be able to concentrate on college in a way that students on the outside could not. After all, they had "time" on their hands and they had few other responsibilities. I quickly realized what a serious (but common) misconception this was. The women, like all New York State inmates, are required to participate in work, study, and counseling programs that take up most of their day. Those who work in the mess hall, for example, have shifts that begin at 5 a.m. They serve hundreds of inmates, scrub huge pots, stir gallons of oatmeal or soup or some other hot, heavy liquid. "I am coming late for class," one inmate wrote, "not because I don't want to be there, but because I have to shower after my shift in the mess hall. I smell nasty and don't want to come to class like that."

Those who work in the laundry are on their feet all day, working with steaming hot equipment in rooms that sometimes reach 115 degrees in the summertime. The "pay" averages from 15 to 30 cents an hour. Those women who do not get any help from outside in the form of money or packages of food or small pre-approved items must use this money to pay for personal hygiene products that are not provided by the system. (I learned about this when one of the officers expressed sympathy for one of the students whom he described as "wearing state, eating state." In prison,

as on the outside, there are the haves and have-nots.) The students in the college program are required to pay tuition of five dollars per semester, and although we make it clear that students who cannot afford to pay this amount do not have to do so, very few students ask for an exemption.

The inmates are separated from their families, particularly their children, and this causes them the greatest pain and worry. (Seventy-five percent of the women in the pre-college program are mothers, more than half with children under the age of six.) These mothers carry pictures of their children, and they keep small personal items that belong to their children with them all the time: hair barrettes, tiny plastic action figures, a stone found on a path during a visit.

In an article that appeared recently in *The New York Times*, Sara Rimer explained the conditions that Elaine Bartlett, a former Bedford Hills prisoner and college student, found on the day she was released and returned home to her four children:

[Bartlett] had fantasized about the welcome party her family would hold in their apartment in a housing project on the Lower East Side, where they have moved in her absence. . . . What greeted her instead was a disaster scene. "There was no food in the refrigerator, no toilet paper," she said. "The toilet seat was broken—the sink was full of dirty dishes. There were roaches and mice running around. The ceiling was black with dirt. . . ." Ms. Bartlett had returned home to find that her family had created its own prison in a housing project, and that she had been living better behind bars than the rest of the family outside. (Rimer B1)

Research has shown the high correlation between poverty and illness, and nowhere is this more evident than in the lives of these inmates, many of whom are HIV positive or suffer from diabetes, cancer, or high blood pressure. The grandmothers, who often raised them, are now raising their children—and the inmates feel anguish and guilt as they watch the toll such responsibility takes: heart disease, asthma, diabetes are common, and deadly. When a grandmother dies, the inmate must then either identify another relative who can take over the care of her children or look on helplessly as the child enters the foster care system. There is an expression among counselors who work with prisoners: "When a man is released from prison, he returns to a woman who has been caring for his children, holding his house together. When a woman is released from prison, she returns to

a woman who has been caring for her children, holding her house together.”

Many of the women were sexually or physically abused as children and fear that their children will be abused; in addition to the other permanent and devastating effects of such abuse, research has shown that sexual abuse has a detrimental effect on a student’s confidence and ability to learn. Many of the inmates were addicted to drugs and/or alcohol when they were arrested and are struggling to overcome these addictions. Although the prison offers highly effective programs, one of the greatest challenges the security officers face is making sure visitors are not carrying in drugs for the prisoners—they are sometimes hidden in the diapers of visiting infants.

Prison living conditions are difficult, even frightening. Bedford Hills may be a model facility in terms of programs, progressive treatment, a staff that supports and encourages growth and change through programs, but it is still a prison. Inmates live in close proximity to other inmates, many of whom are mentally ill, hostile, or violent. The loss of personal choices and freedoms is difficult to adjust to, particularly the state-issued uniforms; highly restricted use of telephones; loss of privacy (phone calls can be monitored and mail can be read); control over every aspect of day-to-day life, including the type of make-up that can be worn, the time one eats, sleeps, works, and moves from one location to another; pat-frisking by male officers (a practice that is being challenged in court); the potential for harsh punishment such as placement in the solitary housing unit (SHU), or loss of other privileges for infractions that often seem arbitrary or capricious; being set up, robbed, or attacked by other inmates. One of the counselors once told me that it takes up to three years for inmates to fully accept the fact that they are “doing time.” They often hold out hope—against serious odds—that their appeals will be successful; they are often so ill or run down by the life they had been leading that they are not at first aware of the severity of their sentences. As one of the college students said in an essay about her life before and after prison:

I can’t believe I am saying this, but I am almost grateful for prison. If I weren’t here, I’d be dead. I had no job and had not had one for seven years. I had lost my kids to crack and I mean lost, I did not even know where they were. I was committing more crimes while awaiting trial for previous crimes. I was in an abusive relationship

that was worse than the one I had left two years before. I didn't know who I was anymore, and I didn't care. A counselor once tried to tell me that I had to come to terms with the sexual abuse I had suffered in my childhood, that I was self medicating, but I remember thinking he had no idea of the deal—did he think I could just pick myself up and go to therapy? Would that be before or after my pimp came to collect?

The younger student inmates, the ones most likely to place into the pre-college program, face an even more difficult time adapting. As Superintendent Elaine Lord noted in an interview:

The younger women are more unruly, and they haven't learned how to adapt to prison routines yet. They expect the prison to adapt to them, just like kids on the streets think they have the world in their hands. They can be like teenagers in high school—focusing on relationships and how they look to peers. They are not thinking much about the future; they live in the now. If they have a long sentence, they really can't conceive of it. A 40- or 50-year sentence to someone who has only lived 17 or 18 years is meaningless. They are more concerned with meeting other young women coming off the intake bus that they might have met at the county jail. They are concerned about how they look. They engage in relationships and experiment with homosexuality because they are fiercely interested in all things sexual—just as many teens in the community are. Too often they see the world as a place where they have to take what they can or be left without. We forget that at this age all teens are still growing and learning how to be people. (Wilson 23)

One of those teens was dismissed from the college program because she was "out of place"; in other words, she had told her unit officer that she was coming to the school building to work on a college writing assignment, but instead she sneaked off with her girlfriend. During this time, she got involved in a fight and seriously hurt someone. "I'm returning my books," she explained. "I can no longer attend college because of a distraction. It's been nice knowing you. Don't worry about me." Her work habits and performance had been exceedingly poor. Her attitude had been so defensive and at times hostile that she was one of the few inmates with whom I felt uncomfortable, even afraid; the other inmates expressed similar

feelings about her. I “lose” students on the outside frequently, but losing students in prison is different. There is truly nowhere else for them to go. That closing line, “Don’t worry about me,” was, I believe, pure bravado. I am convinced that there has not been anyone in that inmate’s life who worried about her, and that is why she was so tough, so defensive, so unable to get along with others. I worried enough to negotiate a one-year suspension rather than a dismissal (again, through the kindness and support of prison officials).

And there is my favorite note of all—actually two notes—from the same inmate. I had just returned a set of essays to my students. After about five minutes Robin (not her real name) approached my desk and placed her essay in front of me. By the time I had finished commenting on her essay, I had written more than she had, and clearly my comments had offended her. I looked down and saw that she had printed, in large letters, the following words: “Are you dissin’ me?” The other students were still reviewing their essays, so I had a chance to respond: “No, Robin, I’m not dissin’ you, I’m trying to help you become a better writer so you can succeed in this course.” When we had a chance to talk (out in the hall, away from the other students, but within earshot of an officer), I discovered that Robin had completed three years of high school, but during those three years, she had not written one essay, “not even one page, not even one paragraph, not even one word,” yet she had passed all of her English courses. Robin was furious that I had “messed up” her essay “with all that shit you wrote. If you don’t like my writing, just give me a bad grade.”

At the end of that semester, after scores of such “discussions” since Robin questioned every one of my comments and corrections, she managed to pass my course and the exit examination and qualify for credit-bearing classes. On the last night of classes, Robin approached my desk in much the same way she had early in the semester; the similarity was clearly intentional. This time, she placed the following note on my desk: “Jane, I really appreciate your suggestions and I also appreciate your position in my life. I am intrigued by learning. I look forward to fighting every Monday. Teach me, Jane, teach me.”

It is notes like these that I concentrate on as I go about the task of teaching writing to the women in the pre-college program at Bedford Hills. I am not naïve enough to think that the problems I’ve listed (and there are scores of others) will either go away of their own accord or be solved entirely by the inmates’ participation in college courses, and I am not naïve enough

to believe that the students whom I teach are in prison because of conditions entirely beyond their control. And I am constantly consumed with the fear that I and other incredibly hard-working volunteers will not be able to continue to raise the funds we need to keep this extraordinary program going. When the program was in such dire need of funding that we were not sure we would be able to continue for another semester, one of the inmates wrote to me saying "I know how hard it is, but please don't take college away. My only way out of this life is an education."

If I have learned anything as a result of my work in the college program at Bedford Hills, it is that what we do matters, helps, makes things better. And that writing—as hard as it is to teach and learn—is a skill that will not only help the women succeed in their college courses, it will help them succeed in negotiating prison life and life after prison in a way that few other skills will.

I will end not with a note, but with an entire essay written by Kecia Pittman, a 27-year-old former pre-college student (she earned her associate's degree last year and was the salutatorian) who "hit" the streets when she was 13 (her mother could not care for her because of a drug addiction), spent the next six years in a series of foster homes, and is serving her third term at Bedford Hills. This essay was written at my request after she sent me a note saying I could never understand her so she wasn't going to do a particular writing assignment. After scores of conversations and writing conferences, I agreed that perhaps she was right, but she would never know unless she tried. I also asked her not to imagine me as a reader, but to imagine "other" readers who knew nothing about her but who sincerely wanted to understand what she wanted and needed to say.

Writing about my college experience is not easy to do because my psyche is wrapped up in it. My personal experiences, my inadequacies, my ideas about success, my family history, and who I am now as opposed to who I was before, influence and shape how I feel about college. Do not get me wrong: I love my education. However, I think and exist in an agonizing dichotomy of future optimism and past failures. My apprehensions are fed by my anger and my hunger for a better life. I look for a release from a gripping past that will threaten me as soon as I step out of these gates.

Because of college, this is the first time in my life I am trying to discover who I have become. Writing for the purpose of sharing



this discovery with people I have never met is so difficult because it is so impersonal. Yet strangely, something inside me wants the reader involved in this process. I want to convey the complexities of revelations and conclusions as they evolve. I shall make every effort to write as if the reader is here with me having an intimate conversation as I churn out ideas about who I am for the very first time.

I do not think the impact college has had on me can be fully understood until I define who I was and still am to some degree. I am the only child of a single-parented African-American home. I went up to the eighth grade. Somehow at age 13, I failed my mother or she failed me because I've been in the street ever since. There are a lot of hurts and disappointments swimming around like sharks in my memory. I survived the group homes and the streets. Decisions were made on pure impulse and they resulted in actions based solely on the inexperience of my 13-year-old mind. I am not feeling sorry for myself, but can you imagine the baggage I carry? There were never trophies or certificates indicating that I was doing the right thing. Instead, my rewards came in good-time sensations and short-lived comforts, no matter how dangerous. Nobody loved me enough to tell me to do different.

Even now I still feel like that 13-year-old child. Surviving. In college, I've learned that since I'm still alive, I've beaten the odds. I survived, yes, but I was never in one home long enough to submerge myself in the healthiness of school, friends, class trips, favorite teachers or prom night. It saddens me to write this because I never was forced to think of my life this way. The loss of my education and everything it represented early in my life contributes to the dichotomy of my fear of failure crowding in on my desire to be optimistic. Although my college experience does not render me automatically healthy, it does make me feel as if someone threw me a lifeline as an alternative to a pre-established pattern of thinking.

Education, no matter how late obtained, has a way of destroying the misconceptions that I lived by. I loved myself but in a submissive and low self-esteem kind of way. I now think that this stunted my ability to avoid many defeatable situations. My psyche was always saying, "I can't, I don't know how." In 1997 I met a college professor here in BHCF who literally turned red in his urgency to teach me otherwise. His main goal was to convince that thing inside me that it was not my fault, something true but so foreign to my understanding of life, of myself.

The one hard truth for me is that although I have made my way to prison three times, this is the first time I will emerge educated. The dichotomy of optimism and fear of failure is a mixture of this time's college experience and last time's unsuccessful releases. The truth is, college has spliced in new ideas to help me consider old perceptions. My understanding of life and my approach to problem solving has been altered in a way that leaves me vulnerable to new heights of optimism for the future but also fears of failing without the excuse of ignorance. The truth is that I now acknowledge myself as an intellectual human being and a symbol of strength by overcoming the odds. Not even the most successful among you may have survived what I have survived.

However, lurking in the depths of my mind is the low self-esteem warning me of who I was and not to trust who I am becoming. I feel like I am sitting between two worlds. You must understand: I have not had a chance to know what this experience will mean when I return to the old boulevards, the ratty tenements, the crackhead avenues. I am mostly concerned that the animalistic drive to survive will take over when I hit the streets again.

I am learning at this moment. I am, for the first time, actively and knowingly dialoging with myself for the purpose of truly figuring out who I am. I like sharing this with you, whoever you are. I am intellectualizing my experience. The fact that I could not have done this before is a revelation popping into my head as I write. I never had a reason to ask myself who I am, never thought my mind could check itself out. Optimism! That is what positive use of my prison time means. I am not involved in the nothingness of doing time. The day-by-day drifting of meaninglessness and depression that can consume a person. As I write I am engaged in an assignment for my professor, Jane Maher, but right now I am discovering college's impact on me. Right now at this writingmoment.

College gave me a need and a reason to believe I could do something with my life even though there are so many things going against that belief. I am so afraid and so hopeful at the same time. My mind feeds on the collision of past and future. Without college there was nothing to hope would change. Without my past there would be nothing to look forward to changing. I am angry at my situation, yet in prison I could waste this anger on so many things

that will never change. However, instead I use my anger to drive my academic achievements. My memories of failure keep me fearful enough to see optimism as the only possible route out of an indescribable, madness, (meaning anger and insanity).

College has been a bridge over some very troubled waters. The impact it has had on me is most of what you have just read. The things I cannot convey are made of words not yet formed in my head to explain. They will come. However, without college nothing would have been needed to be said, because nothing inside of me would have changed.

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